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Home College Series.

Number ~~~~~ * ~~~~~ Twenty-Six.

JOHN MILTON.

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By DANIEL WISE, D.D.

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And what a young man may do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, may do.

J. H. VINCENT.

NEW YORK, Jan., 1883.

JOHN MILTON.

JOHN MILTON was born in Bread Street, London, on the 9th of December, 1608. His father was a respectable scrivener, or writer of wills, deeds, and other legal documents, and "came of an honest or honorable stock." He had proved himself to be a man of sturdy character by openly adhering to Protestantism at the price of being disinherited by his bigoted Roman Catholic father. Our poet's mother was named Sarah, and though her family connections are unknown, it is supposed they were of equal, if not superior, standing to those of his father. She is said to have had very weak eyes, being obliged to use spectacles shortly after she was thirty years old. Milton speaks of her as "a most excellent mother, and particularly known for her charities in the neighborhood."

Of six children born to this suitably matched pair, John Milton was the third. But three of those children dying in infancy he was reared with his sister Anne, several years older than himself, and his brother Christopher, "exactly seven years younger." Their home in Bread Street was in the very heart of old London, where the future poet's mind must have been stored with such imagery as impresses itself on a thoughtful child living in familiarity with the numerous objects which pass and repass with panoramic variety in crowded street life.

Still greater, however, was the influence of Milton's home life on the development of his genius. His home was the abode of plenty, peace, culture, and piety. The busy industry of the scrivener's daily life was crowned by evenings spent around the cheerful fire in religious reading, devotional exercises, musical performances, and conversation,

which was not gossip, but serious discussions between the scrivener and his Puritan callers on such stirring questions as the beheading of the noble Raleigh, the prelatie and Romanistic tendencies of King James, the doings of the Synod of Dort, which condemned the scriptural theories of that great theologian, James Arminius, and kindred questions of Church and of State. All this seriousness was tempered by that sweet cheerfulness which is the effluence of affection united to intelligence. Hence our poet's home was, in the best sense, a home of happiness. Young Milton enjoyed it, as well he might, since he was the pride and delight of his parents, who saw in him the promise of that greatness which his future life fulfilled. His portrait, painted when he was ten years old by Cornelius Jansen, is that, says Masson, "of a very grave and intelligent little Puritan boy with auburn hair. The prevailing expression in the face is a lovable seriousness." A passage in "*Paradise Regained*" is not improbably thought to describe Milton's recollections of his childhood :

"When I was yet a child, no childish play
To me was pleasing; all my mind was set
Serious to learn and know, and thence to do,
What might be public good: myself I thought
Born to that end, born to promote all truth
And righteous things."

Milton's scholastic education began early under his father's direction and care, who also provided him private teachers at home until he was in his twelfth year. He then sent him to St. Paul's Grammar School. These helps, seconded by his own really excessive but loving diligence in study, prepared him for admission to Christ's College, Cambridge University, Feb. 12, 1624, when he was sixteen years and two months old. Here his devotion to study was unabated. It was his habit to "sit up till midnight at his book, which was the first thing that brought his eyes into the danger of

blindness." For some reason, not fully explained, he had some disagreements with Chappell, his first tutor, and with Bainbridge, master of the college, which made him for a time unpopular with the college authorities. Out of these facts arose the legend, sanctioned by Johnson, that Milton was "whipped at college." But, after carefully sifting the evidence by which this scandal was supported, Masson, the poet's most exhaustive biographer, pronounces it unworthy of credit. That he was rusticated for a short time while an undergraduate is tolerably certain. Yet not for any moral misconduct, but probably because his self-assertion and mental independence gave offense to his official superiors, some of whom he despised as being his inferiors, if not in attainments, yet in intellectual breadth and quality of mind.

But, after securing a more congenial tutor, his supreme devotion to study, the superiority of his college exercises, the solidity of his attainments, and the purity of his morals, soon won the admiration, the praise, and the affection of most of the Fellows of his college. Hence, when he closed his university career and received his Master's degree, his reputation at Cambridge, both for scholarship and character, was "extraordinary." Still he did not very highly esteem his Alma Mater. He did not like the system then pursued at Cambridge, and, says Masson, "his subsequent allusions to the university are uniformly critical."

Milton is now nearly twenty-four years old. As he quits college we behold him a man little under middle height, neither massive nor powerful, but slender and elegant in figure. He has light brown hair, an oval face, clear, dark gray eyes, and a complexion so delicately white and red that his classmates have good-humoredly nicknamed him "the lady." His gait is manly and erect, expressing undaunted courage. His demeanor, though not effeminate, is exceedingly affable. He is a man of great personal beauty.

The leading characteristic of his mind is a habitual

seriousness, which is almost austere. He has little taste for festivities, jests, or pastimes, albeit he has made himself a good swordsman by daily practice with that weapon. When thinking of his relations to God he is humble as becometh a sinful man; in presence of men he acts as one deeply conscious of the possession of great facts, displaying a noble egotism, an unbashful self-assertion, which at times clothes him with an air of "kingly intolerance." But there is no more "fixed idea" in his great mind than that of the necessity of moral integrity to a life of truly great endeavor of whatever kind. His polar star was fidelity to duty.

Such was the man John Milton when, in 1632, he returned to his father's house crowned with the respect of the Fellows of Cambridge, leaving, as Masson suggests, no equal behind him in the whole university.

To what uses will this rarely-endowed young man put his great abilities and his superior attainments? How will he find the place among men for which nature and education have fitted him? Let us trace him along the path by which he became a power amid the great movements which were about to take place in his native land.

His father, from the time of his discovery that this beloved boy was endowed with rare gifts, had intended him for the work of the ministry in the Church of England. Milton himself, influenced, not by any sense of obligation to be a minister, but only by his father's wish, had looked forward to a clerical life until toward the approach of the time when he must make a final decision. Then, looking more closely than before through the windows of the Church into her interior, he saw in the rule of Laud so many restrictions on the freedom of her pulpits, so much sympathy with papistical modes of worship, with the despotic claims of the reigning King Charles I., and with the Arminian as against the Calvinistic clergy, that his conscience recoiled from the oaths and submissions required of candidates for orders.

Hence, as one bound by a "fixed idea" of duty which forbade him to settle any great life problem by merely selfish considerations, he refused to further entertain a purpose to seek ordination. In doing this he acted like a true man; but who can estimate what the Church of England missed when his imperial mind made that sacrifice to conscience!

Milton's good father was no longer a citizen of London, but of Horton, Buckinghamshire, whither he had retired with a snug fortune to enjoy the fruits of a life industriously and honorably employed. Thither our graduate went to make known his wishes respecting a profession. At first he inclined to study law, but took no steps in that direction. Very soon, however, the bent of his mind toward a literary life decided him to enter upon a course of general study without any particular professional aim, yet with a sort of dim forecast that it might result in possible authorship, or, perchance, in some other public application of his powers. His poetical college exercises, by their uncommon merit, had already suggested to his university associates and to himself that he was destined to be a poet. Yet neither he nor they foresaw how grand a part he was about to take in national affairs, or to what lofty height his genius would subsequently soar. Could his admiring father have seen through the obscurity of that hour of uncertainty, instead of feeling disappointed, as he did, at his son's determination, he would have seen that it was of all others the best adapted to fit him for the great work Providence intended him to perform.

Milton spent five years at Horton filling his imagination with images of the natural beauty with which it abounded, and diligently reading the literature of both ancient and modern times. While buried in these quiet studies his poetic genius was quickened into productiveness by the request of his intimate friend, Henry Lawes, a musician, that he would write a "masque," or literary entertainment, to be given in honor of the venerable Dowager Countess of Derby, at

Harefield. His response was his "Arcades." The exquisite beauty of this composition led Lord Brackley to ask him for another "masque," to be performed at an entertainment to be given to the neighboring nobility and gentry at Shropshire Castle. To meet his lordship's wishes Milton wrote his "Comus," in which, to sensuous pictures of English landscape and atmosphere, he joined rich ideal conceptions of moral and intellectual beauty, breathing a healthful purity of tone and expressed in rhythmic words of unexceptionable literary taste. The sudden death by drowning of his college companion, Edward King, moved him to write a monody, which he named "Lycidas." These poems, with a few sonnets, and his "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," were all written during the five years of his abode in Horton. They illustrated the vast range of his reading, the influence of Italian poets on his poetic genius, the delicacy, sweetness, and melody of his versification. They justified the expectation of his friends respecting his poetical endowments which had budded in numerous compositions from the time he was ten years old; but which now bloomed into poems that commanded the "admiration of critics," and gave him, if not the highest, yet no mean eminence among the poets of his native land.

In 1637 Milton's mother died. Not long after, his brother Christopher, then recently married, took up his abode with their venerable father, and our poet started on a tour to Continental Europe. His generous father furnished him with money, since Milton himself had never earned "a penny for himself," nor did he do so, says Masson, until he was over thirty-two years of age. His consenting to live so long in this dependent condition must be taken as proof, both of his good father's pecuniary ability and of his strong desire to give his learned son the fullest opportunity possible to prepare himself for a great career.

Milton spent fifteen months visiting France, Italy, and

Switzerland, making the acquaintance of the most distinguished men of the age, and constantly adding to his rich stores of knowledge. His learning and conversation won admiration wherever he went. He would have prolonged his stay, but for the muttering sounds of the impending revolution in his native land which, even at that distance, reached his attentive ears. "I thought it dishonorable," he writes, "that I should be traveling at my ease for amusement when my fellow-countrymen at home were fighting for liberty." Spurred by patriotic desires to bear his proper part in the great conflict he hastened across the channel. In closing his account of his journey he penned these memorable words: "I take God to witness that in all those places where so many things are considered lawful, I lived sound and untouched from all profligacy and vice, having this thought perpetually with me, that, though I might escape the eyes of men, I certainly could not the eyes of God."

Milton's tour in Italy stands intimately related to his great epics. The unstinted praises he received there from the lips of learned men stimulated his literary ambition, until he resolved to write a poem such as mankind "should not willingly let die." What should be its topic and what its form, epic or lyric, became questions on which he deeply and constantly thought. But before he reached a decision the din of approaching national convulsion filled his ears and summoned his pen to attempt a sterner task. Parliament in its war on the prelacy of the English Church needed a champion. To Milton the strife was congenial. He was a born Reformer. Hence he hastened to buckle on his polemical armor and to engage in the momentous strife.

Our poet is now living in London, his father having removed from Horton to Reading with his son Christopher. Milton is in a hired house instructing a few boy pupils, the sons of wealthy friends. Here, too, he is busy writing a treatise on Church discipline which, when published, arouses the

ire of churchmen, and provokes a reply from Bishop Hall. A quintette of Puritan ministers retort on Hall, for whose rescue Archbishop Usher enters the lists. This strong man, by pressing the five Puritans with superior learning and logic, compels Milton to resume his pen, which he wields with such learning, vigor, and logic, that when he sends out his fifth pamphlet he remains master of the field.

By this time the sword of civil war is drawn. Parliament and king are at war; armies are mustering; England is in the throes of fierce revolution. But why Milton does not respond to freedom's call for soldiers is unknown. Early in 1643, for some reason never explained, our poet takes a journey into Oxfordshire. He is absent only one short month when he returns to London with a wife whom he had wooed and won in that brief period. Her maiden name was Mary Powell, with whom he may have had some slight previous acquaintance, but who is utterly unfitted to be the wife of such a studious and austere man as Milton is. She can dance and flirt, but cannot bring herself into harmony with the pursuits, the tastes, the habits, and the aspirations of a man whose mind dwells in a realm of thought too high and too vast for her comprehension. Masson describes her as "No Minerva, but a simple and apparently rather stupid country girl." Very naturally, before the honey-moon expires, she is dissatisfied with her lot. Sad and homesick, she obtains Milton's consent to pay a short visit to her father's house. Once there she refuses to return. Milton being indignant, and perhaps aware that by marrying her he has committed a life-long mistake, takes to writing pamphlets on divorce, arguing with strong logic, bad use of Scripture, and equally bad ethics, that "moral incompatibility is as good a ground for divorce as conjugal infidelity, if not a better." Alas! that so ripe a scholar and so pure a man should permit his indignation to so blind his judgment as to make him the advocate of a theory that robs marriage of its sanctity, and,

on the plea of personal liberty, justifies a license destructive of social purity. But the moral and religious instincts of the times were stronger than Milton's arguments, and his pamphlets did no further harm than to cast a shadow on his reputation.

It is not unlikely that he would have reduced his theory to practice, by ignoring the law of the land and marrying another woman to whom he was already making suit, but for the return of Mrs. Milton to his home, with suitable apologies for having forsaken it. Necessity, not affection, moved her to this step. Her friends were Royalists. The king's armies were flying before the victorious Roundheads, and Mrs. Milton's father and his family were only too glad to find shelter and protection under the Puritan poet's roof. His own father was now residing with him, and he was still employed with his pupils, for whose benefit he made several compilations, but did "next to nothing" in poetry.

In 1649, Parliament, regardless of the divinity supposed "to hedge about a king," beheaded Charles I. No doubt that false, despotic monarch deserved this tragic death. But such was the prevailing traditional respect for royalty, that the fall of the king's head on the scaffold sent a thrill of horror through the heart of England. The people showed signs of disaffection toward the Parliament which had done the just, yet dreaded, deed. Whereupon our brave Milton employed his pen in defense of the judicial ax. His opportune pamphlet attracted the attention of the Government of the Commonwealth, and he was appointed foreign or Latin Secretary to the Council.

Two pamphlets soon appeared censuring the execution of the king. One, in English, falsely portrayed the dead Charles as a saint, eulogizing him as "the royal martyr." The other, in Latin, by the learned Salmasius, was widely circulated among learned men, particularly on the Continent. Milton replied to both, cutting the former to pieces with a

merciless and triumphant criticism, and so completely exposing the fallacies of the latter as to overwhelm Salmasius with a chagrin which, it was thought, hastened his death.

Victorious in controversy, recognized by his Puritan friends as their strongest intellectual athlete, Milton was nevertheless doomed to suffer sore affliction. When thirty-five years old he had begun to be conscious of a slight dimness in his vision. Very slowly, yet surely, this dimness had increased from year to year. But now that he is in the very prime of his life, about forty-four years old, he becomes "totally blind!" No mark or speck, not even an appearance of dimness, in his eyes, betrays the sad fact to observing friends. But his sight is gone, and very soon the words "Milton is blind" pass from lip to lip, moving his friends to sympathetic grief and his enemies to malicious joy.

Just before his blindness becomes total his wife dies, leaving three children to his care: Anne, about seven years old; Mary, five; Deborah, an infant. His father has now been dead some time; so has his father-in-law. His wife's family have gone back to their old home. Poor blind Milton! The death of his wife does not probably wound his affections very deeply, but to be blind with three tiny motherless children vainly wailing in his ears for maternal attention, is indeed a trial hard to be borne, and more likely to irritate than to sooth a nature like his, which finds its highest pleasure, not in familiar intercourse with friends, but in the seclusion of a quiet study.

Blind though he is, Milton continues in his office, dictating his correspondence and pamphlets to an amanuensis. Some three years after his first wife's death he marries again, but this time to a lady named Catharine Woodcock, who is better fitted than was Mary Powell to be his wife. But in less than one year she dies in giving birth to a child, which dies also. Milton mourns his loss in a sonnet, in which he says:

“To my fancied sight
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined
So clear, as in no place with more delight.”

Milton continues to defend the republic with his pen whenever it is assailed. In political controversy he has no equal. But the pen has no power to stay the arm of death, and Milton, when forty-nine years old, is called to grieve over the death of the “chief of men,” the hitherto irresistible Cromwell. Uncertainty, almost anarchy, follows the fall of the greatest soldier of the Commonwealth. Yet, standing with firm integrity by his principles, “bating no jot of heart or hope,” Milton bravely plies his pen against kingship and in favor of a free commonwealth, even down to the year in which Charles II., supported by Monk’s army, ascended his father’s throne. Having justified the regicides in doughty pamphlets, he probably expects to share their doom. He is actually arrested. His writings are publicly burned by the common hangman. He makes no concessions, yet is soon set at liberty and left to pursue his way as he lists, through the solicitations, as is supposed, of Davenant, the poet-laureate of the restored dynasty.

Our poet is now nearly fifty-two years old. The Commonwealth to which he has devoted his Titanic strength during the last twenty years, and of which he has been the intellectual leader, lies in majestic ruin before him. Yet he sees no reason to regret the great part he filled in the national tragedy. The principles he taught he believes to be eternal, and will survive to work out their grand results in the future history of mankind. He is, as he was when Cromwell lived to apply his theories, an ultra-republican in politics, a radical independent in Church government, a believer in religious toleration and in the freedom of the press. Conscious of having put these great thoughts into words worthy of their greatness, he is content to leave them as sharp arrows to be used under happier auspices by reformers as yet unborn.

Such is his faith in the year 1660. And we who live to-day know his faith was not a dream. Milton's theories are seething like restless waves in the hearts of men, and steadily forcing modern institutions into harmony with their demands.

The Restoration introduced an epoch of moral corruption into England. Immorality reigned with unblushing face at court. Bad men sat in the seats of power. Sensuality poisoned its literature. Morality and Puritanism were regarded with scornful contempt. To Milton, especially, the times were evil. Blind, neglected, except by a few learned friends and scholarly strangers from abroad, detested and ill-treated by two of his undutiful daughters, his life was indeed a troubled one. Hoping to find some relief from his domestic troubles, he married a third wife when fifty-four years of age. The lady, though twenty-eight years younger than himself, was "very kind and careful of him." His three daughters, proving incorrigible, and hating to read to him as required to do in languages they did not understand, were, in 1669, sent from home to learn some art by which to earn their own living. Doubtless they were greatly to blame; but it is equally certain that Milton's stern, austere mode of life and undemonstrative nature unfitted him to develop the better side of his motherless children. They were unfilial, but he was a very imperfect father.

During the fourteen years which lay between the Restoration and our poet's death, besides several prose works, he wrote his immortal epics, "Paradise Lost," "Paradise Regained," and his dramatic poem, "Samson Agonistes." It is supposed that he began the first during the latter years of Cromwell's life. It is certain, however, that the greater part of it was written during the years next preceding the date of its publication, April, 1667. Simmons, his publisher, paid him the contemptible sum of £5 for this immortal poem, with a promise of £5 additional when 1,300 copies should

have been sold, and still another £5 after the sale of 1,300 copies of the second edition, the same royalty to be paid also for successive editions. Milton lived to see the publication of its third edition.

"Paradise Regained," written at the suggestion of a Quaker named Ellwood, was published with his "Samson Agonistes" in the same volume in 1671.

Three years after the appearance of "Paradise Regained," our poet, now greatly esteemed and often visited by illustrious strangers curious to see the man whose mighty genius had produced the grandest poem of the age, if not of all ages, was brought face to face with death. His old enemy, the "gout, struck in," and on the 8th of November, 1674, he passed quietly and painlessly away into the eternal Paradise of which he had sung so sweetly in his imperishable poems.

Of Milton's religious experience little is known beyond what may be inferred from his writings and his manner of life. Of the purity of his morals, and of his loyalty to his convictions, there can be but one opinion. That his doctrinal views were somewhat alloyed with the dross of error must be admitted.* It is also true that his nature was stern, and that, in his controversial writings, he exhibited in high degree that fierceness and uncharitableness which, though characteristic of both Puritan and Cavalier in his troublous times, cannot be regarded as fruits of a Christ-like charity. Assuredly his piety was more intellectual than emotional. It was more deeply rooted in his conscience than in his affections. If we knew what passed in the secret chambers of

* Peter Cunningham, the annotator of "Johnson's Lives of English Poets," observes that Milton's theological opinions were determined in 1823 by a discovery in the State Paper Office of his "Treatise on Christian Doctrine," written in Latin and printed in 1824 by command of George IV. Milton was an Arian. And Mr. C. cites Hallam as saying, that "the discovery of Milton's Arianism in this rigid generation has already impaired the sale of 'Paradise Lost.'"

his grand soul, especially in the latter years of his life, we should probably learn that in his personal relations to God he was as loyal as he had always been to the great principles which he believed to be grounded in the utterances of Holy Writ.

Concerning Milton's character, Macaulay justly observes : "There are a few [historic] characters which have stood the closest scrutiny and the severest tests; which have been tried in the furnace and have proved pure; which have been weighed in the balance and have not been found wanting; which have been declared sterling by the general consent of mankind, and which are visibly stamped with the image and superscription of the Most High. These great men we trust that we know how to prize. And of these was Milton. The sight of his books, the sound of his name, are refreshing to us. His thoughts resemble those celestial fruits and flowers which the "Virgin Martyr" of Massinger sent down from the gardens of Paradise to the earth, distinguished from the productions of other soils, not only by their superior bloom and sweetness, but by their miraculous efficacy to invigorate and to heal. They are powerful, not only to delight, but to elevate and purify. Nor do we envy the man who can study either the life or the writings of the great poet and patriot without aspiring to emulate, not indeed the sublime works with which his genius has enriched our literature, but the zeal with which he labored for the public good, the fortitude with which he endured every private calamity, the lofty disdain with which he looked down on temptations and dangers, the deadly hatred which he bore to bigots and tyrants, and the faith which he so sternly kept with his country and with his fame."

It would be little less than impertinence to attempt any discussion of the merits of Milton's poetry in a paper so limited as this. It must, therefore, suffice to say that the opinion of mankind has placed his name in the loftiest niche

of poetic fame; and that no one can make any just pretension to a knowledge of English literature who does not at least read with care his marvelously musical epics, "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained." A few brief extracts is all we have space to insert :

"How charming is divine philosophy!
Not harsh and rugged, as dull fools suppose;
But musical as is Apollo's lute."—COMUS.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."
—PARADISE LOST.

"Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth
Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep."
—IBID.

"The other shape,
(If shape it might be called that shape had none
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb,
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
For each seemed either,) black it stood as night,
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell,
And shook a dreadful dart, what seemed his head
The likeness of a kingly crown had on."—IBID.

"Good, the more
Communicated, more abundant grows."—IBID.

THE POETRY OF VIRTUE AND PIETY.

“For in the days . . . of old there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God.”
—NEHEMIAH.

“Was there ever any thing so delightful as the music of ‘Paradise Lost?’ It is like that of a fine organ, has the fullest and deepest tones of majesty with all the softness and eloquence of the Dorian lute; variety without end, and never equaled except, perhaps, by Virgil.”—COWPER.

“Milton stood alone and aloof above his times, the bard of immortal subjects, and as far as there is perpetuity in language, of immortal fame.”—CAMPBELL.

“We often hear of the magical influence of poetry. The expression in general means nothing, but applied to the writings of Milton it is most appropriate; his poetry acts like an incantation. . . . It is impossible to conceive that the mechanism of language can be brought to a more exquisite degree of perfection.”—MACAULAY.

“Milton’s ‘Comus,’ well worked out, with a complete originality and extraordinary elevation of style, is, perhaps, his masterpiece, and is simply the eulogy of virtue.”—TAINÉ.

“Milton had that universality which marks the highest order of intellect.”—CHANNING.

“Three poets, in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn:
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed;
The next in majesty; in both the last.
The force of nature could no further go:
To make a third she joined the former two.”

—DRYDEN’S EPIGRAM ON MILTON.

JOHN MILTON.

[THOUGHT-OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.]

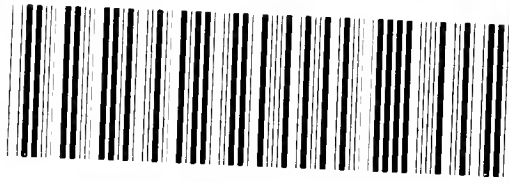
1. Birth—time and place? Parents? Children? Home life? Education?
2. Appearance at 24? Seriousness? Why not a minister? At Horton?
“Masque?” Early poems?
3. Death of mother? The continent? In London? Controversy? Civil war?
Marriage? Mary Powell?
4. Secretary to the Council? Controversy? Blindness? Bereavement? Chil-
dren? Second marriage? Again bereaved? Cromwell? Corruption in
England after the Restoration?
5. Third wife? Daughters? Fourteen years of literary work? Death? Re-
ligious experience?

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